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'Killer robots' to be debated at UN

Killer robots will be debated during an informal meeting of experts at the United Nations in Geneva.

Two robotics experts, Prof Ronald Arkin and Prof Noel Sharkey, will debate the efficacy and necessity of killer robots.

The meeting will be held during the UN Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW).

A report on the discussion will be presented to the CCW meeting in November.

This will be the first time that the issue of killer robots, or lethal autonomous weapons systems, will be addressed within the CCW.

Autonomous kill function

A killer robot is a fully autonomous weapon that can select and engage targets without any human intervention. They do not currently exist but advances in technology are bringing them closer to reality.

Those in favour of killer robots believe the current laws of war may be sufficient to address any problems that might emerge if they are ever deployed, arguing that a moratorium, not an outright ban, should be called if this is not the case.

However, those who oppose their use believe they are a threat to humanity and any autonomous "kill functions" should be banned.

"Autonomous weapons systems cannot be guaranteed to predictably comply with international law," Prof Sharkey told the BBC. "Nations aren't talking to each other about this, which poses a big risk to humanity."

Prof Sharkey is a member and co-founder of the Campaign Against Killer Robots and chairman of the International Committee for Robot Arms Control.

Side events at the CCW will be hosted by the Campaign to Stop Killer Robots.

Automation of warfare

Prof Arkin from the Georgia Institute of Technology told the BBC he hoped killer robots would be able to significantly reduce non-combatant casualties but feared they would be rushed into battle before this was accomplished.

"I support a moratorium until that end is achieved, but I do not support a ban at this time," said Prof Arkin.

He went on to state that killer robots may be better able to determine when not to engage a target than humans, "and could potentially exercise greater care in so doing".

Prof Sharkey is less optimistic. "I'm concerned about the full automation of warfare," he says.

The discussion of drones is not on the agenda as they are yet to operate completely autonomously, although [there are signs](#) this may change in the near future.

The UK successfully tested the Taranis, an unmanned intercontinental aircraft in Australia this year and America's Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (Darpa) has made advances with the Crusher, an unmanned ground combat vehicle, since 2006.

The MoD has [claimed in the past](#) that it currently has no intention of developing systems that operate without human intervention.

On 21 November 2012 the United States Defense Department issued a directive that, "requires a human being to be 'in-the-loop' when decisions are made about using lethal force," according to [Human Rights Watch](#).

The meeting of experts will be chaired by French ambassador Jean-Hugues Simon-Michel from 13 to 16 May 2014.

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